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SUBJECT: STAFFDEL BLANK IN THE MEKONG DELTA: AVIAN INFLUENZA, LOCAL MUSLIM COMMUNITY, AND TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

REF: HCMC 810; B) HCMC 437; C) HCMC 82

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11. (SBU) Summary: During a visit to the Mekong Delta province of An Giang August 25 and 26, Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) Staffer Jonah Blank reviewed government efforts to control Avian Influenza, visited a women's shelter and examined the status of the ethnic Cham Muslim community. AI controls were in place down to the village level, although local implementation may not be quite as robust as officials indicated. None of the women in the shelter were trafficked internationally, and none of the officials we spoke with indicated that international trafficking was a concern, despite strong evidence that the Mekong Delta is a key source point for regional TIP. While their praise of the GVN seemed somewhat forced, ethnic Cham leaders did not complain of religious freedom restrictions and appeared to enjoy greater economic prosperity than their ethnic Vietnamese neighbors. End Summary.

Avian Influenza in An Giang

12. (SBU) SFRC Policy Advisor Jonah Blank visited a poultry farm with Bureau of Animal Health officials to review efforts to combat Avian Influenza. The farm, located in a border district in the Mekong Delta province of An Giang, consisted largely of ducks (about 300) with a smaller number of chickens. The farm owner noted he usually maintains a flock of 2,000, but most had already been sold. He said that he changed farming practices in compliance with new government regulations. He noted that his poultry no longer roam freely and constructed an eating space for the poultry with a slate floor over a body of water, to better manage the waste. However, the effluent appeared to flow into a river channel.

13. (U) Director of the Bureau of Animal Health Viet said that all farmers are required to register their poultry. Domestic households owning poultry are managed by "self-regulating groups" formed by local authorities. These groups are akin to community watch groups, and are charged with ensuring that local poultry stocks are reported to local authorities so that they may be vaccinated and monitored. According to Viet, all farmers

have been trained to look for symptoms of AI among poultry, including loss of appetite, ragged appearance, change in facial color, fever. He noted that farmers are required to report any ill poultry, regardless of symptom. He asserted that all farmers have been educated about AI through radio broadcasts and leaflets. In addition to informing them about the poultry registration requirement and the ban against free-range poultry, farmers have been educated about human symptoms of AI and preventative measures for handling poultry.

¶4. (U) Once farmers register their poultry, vaccinations are scheduled. Vaccinations are administered by bureau officials and the farmers themselves in two cycles spaced five months apart. In each cycle two injections are given one month apart. Viet noted that farms are also frequently sprayed with disinfectants. Neither the farm owner nor the animal husbandry officials mentioned post-vaccination testing, which per Ref A is supposed to occur one and four months after vaccination.

¶5. (U) The Animal Health Official stated that if any sick poultry is reported, it is tested for the H5N1 virus, but is not immediately slaughtered. Rather, it is isolated while awaiting test results. If H5N1 is found, the entire flock is slaughtered. Farmers are compensated about \$1.30 per head of poultry, whether duck or chicken; roughly one-third its market value.

¶6. (SBU) According to Viet, to date, An Giang has not had any confirmed cases of the H5N1 virus. Cases of human transmission apparently have been through the ingestion of sick poultry and/or "blood cakes," a Vietnamese delicacy made from the blood of chickens. He stated that there have been no reported cases of transmission through direct physical contact with poultry in the province. Blank expressed surprise, as the commonly reported transmission mode is direct contact with infected poultry; Viet did not reply. Blank praised government officials for their efforts in preventing the spread of AI. He noted, however, that government compensation for slaughtered poultry

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was too low to ensure that farmers reported sick poultry. Viet stated that he hoped more financial assistance from the U.S. would be forthcoming to assist them in their efforts.

The Cham Population of An Giang

¶7. (U) The Staffdel visited an ethnic Cham Sunni Muslim village in An Giang's Tan Chau district near the Cambodian border. Clan Leader Cado and Chief Musha of the Muslim Representative Board of An Giang were present, but Chief Musha did most of the talking. Musha said that there are 12,500 Muslims in An Giang province in roughly 2,000 households. The community has a total of 12 mosques and 14 smaller worshipping places. The Cham community has largely abandoned its traditional occupation of fishing for more lucrative ventures such as small business, trading and agriculture. The Cham Muslim community now is fully literate. All Muslim children are enrolled in local schools so they are fluent in both Vietnamese and in the Cham language. Some Cham students have received scholarships to study abroad in countries such as in Malaysia and Indonesia. (Note: Clan Leader Cado told us that he has six children living in the U.S., Malaysia and Australia. End Note.)

¶8. (SBU) The Muslim leaders painted a glowing picture of government support for the Cham Muslim community. For example, the GVN provided housing aid; a tour of the village revealed a row of new and modern homes built with government assistance. Chief Musha stated that the government also provided financial assistance for the Cham to print their own religious texts. He said the government trusts the Muslim community because they are "not interested in political issues." The village elder is ethnic Cham. Candidates for this position are proposed by the local (Party and Government) authorities and the Cham people then vote for the candidates.

¶9. (SBU) Chief Musha reported that the government has allowed them to practice Islam freely. He noted that the Koran has been translated into Vietnamese and the community is working to translate it into Cham. The village leaders noted that they have no family ties and little interaction with ethnic Cham in Cambodia; very few Vietnamese Cham have visited Cambodia "because they don't speak Khmer."

¶10. (SBU) The Muslim leaders stated that they have no official relations with Muslims in other countries. However, about 40 persons in the 200-household village the Staffdel was visiting have gone on the Hajj pilgrimage; half were funded by the Saudi Royal family. (Note: This assertion is in contrast with a visit to the province by the Consul General in December 2005. Visiting the border post, the CG witnessed a small group of Muslim "tourists" cross from Vietnam into Cambodia. Border officials stated that a small number of Malay religious visitors came to An Giang each month. Cham leaders told the CG that they had ties with Malay Moslems whose culture and traditions are close to the Cham. See Ref C for additional information on Vietnam's Muslim Community. End Note.)

The Women's Victims Center in Can Tho

¶11. (U) The StaffDel also visited a trafficking victims center in Can Tho run by the provincial Women's Union. Women's Union Vice-Chairwoman Thuy said the center -- which opened in 2005 -- currently cares for twenty-three residents, twelve of whom recently had returned home. The center has the capacity to house thirty residents. The center focuses on providing the victims two months of vocational training in sewing. The Women's Union representative asserted that this training is enough to secure a job in a factory. Five residents have been trained to be hair dressers. Classes in handicraft, baking and cooking are also offered. This free training also is offered to other girls at high risk for being trafficked.

¶12. (SBU) The age of residents ranges from 14 to 23; the average age is roughly 16. According to Ms. Thuy, the residents are either victims of sexual abuse or were prostitutes. None were trafficked internationally. The victims of sexual abuse were

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taken out of their communities and brought to the center because the molester was someone in their home or community and/or they could not stay in the community because they were stigmatized by the abuse. Thuy stated that the center coordinates with the provincial unit of the "anti-social evils police," which refers victims to the center. Referrals can also come from local authorities. Women's Union caseworkers also visit public parks to approach at-risk girls, but these women usually do not accept assistance. Among center residents who were prostitutes, most came from poor families, but some were middle-class. None of the residents fell into the sex trade because of a drug habit. She noted incidents of "pimps" coming to the center to reclaim a sex worker in which police intervention was sought.

¶13. (SBU) Comment: None of the victims in the Women's Union shelter were victims of trafficking to Cambodia. And, neither Women's Union nor other officials raised the issue of cross-border trafficking with us. This is surprising given the number of Vietnamese women working the sex trade in Cambodia, the anecdotal accounts from NGOs operating in the area on cross-border trafficking, and the TIP ring bust in HCMC involving Mekong Delta women (ref A).

¶14. (SBU) Comment Continued: Avian Influenza controls at the poultry farm appeared adequate and were not put in place just for our benefit. However, AI controls in the village appeared more lax. There were numerous free-range ducks and chickens wandering around the village and the village "AI guard post" was hastily manned for our arrival. The Cham rosy depiction of GVN support and non-interference was almost certainly said for the benefit of the GVN officials sitting immediately outside the meeting venue. Other contacts tell us that the GVN monitors the

Muslim community in the Delta and in HCMC very closely. That said, the Cham village appeared to be much more prosperous than the ethnic Vietnamese community where the poultry farm is located. End Comment.

15. (U) Mr. Blank did not clear this message.
WINNICK